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ABSTRACT

In a study of the differences in male and female descriptions of nine photographs, picture type was found to be an important variable. Twelve male and 8 female college students were asked to describe each of the photographs. Picture type was rated as high in interest to males, high in interest to females, or high in interest to both. Responses were scored for five categories of language use: word production (number of words, self-references, and color references); weakeners (self-deprecation, qualifiers such as "kind of" or "looks like"); fillers ("um," "er," "okay"); paralinguistic features (question inflection, laughter); and queries or comments to the experimenter (task-related or task-irrelevant). Picture type was found to affect length of description (shortest for female-interest pictures), color references (most for female-interest), and question intonation (most common for male-interest). The use of self-reference and self-deprecation were both associated with question intonation and laughter. Results suggest that while topic affects speech style, gender does not. (MSE)

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MALE AND FEMALE LANGUAGE IN A PICTURE-DESCRIPTION TASK

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What differences are there in the speech styles of women and men? The stereotypes are familiar: women's speech is less logical and organized, less forceful and direct than men's; uses more euphemisms and empty adjectives; and women speak faster and talk more than men. Many of these stereotypes were stated as fact by the linguist Otto Jesperson in his influential 1922 book, Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin, and they went unexamined for decades after. Jesperson's single chapter on gender differences ("The Woman") is a fascinating example of the power of stereotypes in forcing an interpretation of data. For example, he describes an experiment in which "well-educated persons" were asked to quickly read a paragraph and were then given an immediate free recall test:

"It was found that women were usually more successful than men in this test. Not only were they able to read more quickly than the men, but they were able to give a better account of the paragraph as a whole. One lady, for instance, could read exactly four times as fast as her husband, and even then give a better account than he of that small portion of the paragraph he had alone been able to read. But it was found that this rapidity was no proof of intellectual power, and some of the slowest readers were highly distinguished men....with the quick reader it is as though every statement were admitted immediately and without inspection to fill the vacant chambers of the mind, while with the slow reader...every new fact seems to stir up the accumulated stores of facts..."

These speculations inspire Jesperson to generalize from memory to speech and to quote Swift:

"The common fluency of speech in many men, and in most women, is owing to the scarcity of matter, and scarcity of words; for whoever is a master of language, and hath a mind full of ideas, will be apt in speaking to hesitate upon the choice of both; whereas common speakers have only one set of ideas, and one set of words to clothe them in; and these are always ready at the mouth."

More recently, researchers have begun to gather empirical evidence on gender differences in speech style, and the data have provided a few surprises. For example, contrary to stereotype, men talk more than women in nearly every situation studied: in naturally occurring pairs in public places; in the laboratory, when discussing a problem specified by the experimenter; in mock jury deliberations; in making a decision with their spouses; when the total interaction between a married couple is recorded for 16 consecutive hours; etc. (Eakins and Eakins, 1978). There is also some evidence suggesting that while women may introduce more conversational topics, men may more often decide which topics are developed.

Other "gender differences" evaporate when relevant variables other than gender are adequately controlled. For example, Lakoff (1973) identified a set of features she labelled "women's language:" the use of intensifiers ("SO pretty"), tag questions ("That was a good lunch, wasn't it?"), empty adjectives ("nice"), question intonation with a declarative statement, and others. Lakoff's categorization was based on intuition rather than empirical measurement. When O'Barr and Atkins (1981) analyzed 150 hours of courtroom testimony for the occurrence of WL features, they found WL to be a function of status rather than gender: low-status speakers of both sexes frequently used "women's" language and high status speakers of both sexes used it rarely. O'Barr and Atkins proposed that the set of features identified by Lakoff be renamed "powerless language."

One aspect of gender differences in speech style that has been little examined is the question of topic of discourse. Do

men and women typically use different language in part because they tend to talk about different things? We decided to look at speech production in a laboratory setting as a function of both subject sex and topic.

METHOD. Twelve male and 8 female college students were asked to describe each of a set of 9 photographs. The photographs were selected on the basis of previous independent ratings of their degree of interest and appeal. Three photographs had been rated as high in interest to males and low in interest to females; three had been rated as high in interest to females and low in interest to males; and three were rated as being of equal and high interest to both females and males. Mean interest ratings to the appropriate group were equated across picture types. Subjects were told that other students would later attempt to use their descriptions to identify each of the pictures from among a group of very similar ones and that their descriptions should therefore be as complete and detailed as possible. Each subject described all 9 photographs. Order of presentation was counterbalanced across subjects. Subjects' descriptions were recorded on cassette tape, transcribed, and scored for 5 categories of language use, derived from previous research and giving a total of 10 dependent variables:

I. Word production

- a. number of words
- b. self-references
- c. color references

II. Weakeners

- a. self depreciation
- b. qualifiers (e.g., kind of, probably, looks like)

III. Fillers (um, er, okay)

IV. Paralinguistics

- a. question inflection
- b. laughter

V. Queries or Comments to Experimenter

- a. task-related
- b. task-irrelevant

RESULTS. A series of 2×3 analyses of variance performed on the dependent measures indicated that Picture Type was an important variable. It affected length of utterance (Number of Words), with female-interest pictures eliciting shortest descriptions from both female and male subjects, $F(2,36) = 13.16$, $p < .0001$. (Because of this difference in length of utterance, all subsequent analyses were performed on the ratio Dependent Variable/Number of Words.) Picture Type also affected the use of Color References, with 2 1/2 times as many occurring in Female-Interest pictures, $F(2,36) = 29.84$, $p < .0001$. Though the use of color in the male- and female-interest picture sets was identical, the color in the female-interest pictures was more salient to the subjects.

There was also a trend toward an effect of Picture Type on the use of Question Intonation ($p < .06$). Curiously, a look at the cell means suggests that the tendency was for both sexes to use Question Intonation most for male-interest pictures. Males also used Question Intonation for female-interest pictures, but females did not. Though it would be unwise to overemphasize this borderline and nonsignificant effect, it deserves further study because it suggests that the use of this particular "women's language" feature may be more sensitive to context in females than in males.

To sum up this pattern of results: The sexes were far more alike than different in their linguistic behavior in this task. Contrary to stereotype, men and women did not differ on any of the dependent variables. It is especially interesting that there were no sex differences given that the dependent measures were chosen on the basis of previous research (e.g., Number of Words) or linguistic intuition (e.g., "women's language" features such as Qualifiers) as most promising for revealing sex differences. On the other hand, there were significant effects of Picture Type on Number of Words, Color Terms, and a trend toward an effect on Question Intonation.

The implications of these results will be discussed following a description of correlations of interest between dependent variables.

Two clusters of correlations emerged. First, Number of Words was negatively related to Fillers ($r = -.25$, $p < .0006$). Fillers and Qualifiers were also related to each other ($r = .16$, $p < .03$). There was also a trend toward a negative relationship between Number of Words and Qualifiers ($r = -.14$, $p < .06$). In other words, people of both sexes who used more qualifiers and, especially, fillers, use fewer words overall.

The second cluster of correlations is a relationship between both Self-Reference and Self-Deprecation and Laughter and Question Intonation. In other words, the use of self-reference ("I think...", "It looks to me like...") accompanies Question Intonation ($r = .18$, $p < .02$) and Laughter ($r = .17$, $p < .02$). The use of Self-Deprecation ("I'm not sure...;" "I could be wrong but...;" "I don't know what you want...") is also highly related

to Question Intonation ($r = .45$, $p < .0001$) and to Laughter ($r = .37$, $p < .0001$). People who refer to themselves, and especially who disparage themselves, are also more likely to laugh and to qualify their statements.

The results I've described are consistent with some earlier work in suggesting that what at first glance appears to be a stable gender difference may be attributable to other variables -- as when O'Barr and Atkins showed that "women's language" is characteristic of low-status speakers of both sexes. The present study has shown that, in our simple description task, topic affects speech style while gender does not. By implication, some of the earlier research showing, for example, that men are much more verbose than women may have unwittingly used topics that uniquely elicited those differences, or may have allowed male control of topic. (In our study, female-interest pictures elicited the fewest number of words.) At any rate, with speaker/listener status and sex of listener controlled for, we found no significant gender differences.

The correlations among dependent variables point to the importance of measuring aspects of speech that one might call paralinguistics, such as question intonation with a declarative statement and laughter, and to look at the relationship between speech variables to help understand the function of each one singly. Here, qualifiers and fillers are negatively related to word production. Further, the cluster of relationships between self-deprecation, question intonation and laughter suggest that they measure self-consciousness or discomfort in the task. Qual-

ifiers, fillers, self-deprecation, question intonation and laughter all seem to be functioning much as Lakoff proposed, as weakeners of the verbal utterance. However, they occur with equal frequency in female and male speakers.

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